



Ecotourism potential clients' perceptions, practices and motivations– an exploratory study

By

Adrián Coto Couceiro

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Faculdade de Economia da Universidade do Porto

Supervised by:

Prof. Dr. Catarina Judite Morais Delgado

Prof. Dr. Cristina Chaves

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Biographical Note

Adrián Coto Couceiro was born in A Estrada (Galicia, Spain). After being graduated by Manuel García Barros High School in his hometown, he was awarded by IES A Basella (Vilanova de Arousa, Galicia, Spain) as Senior Technician in Environmental Chemistry.

Later on, he joined Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, finishing his Master Degree in Political Science and Public Management, after doing his specialization in International Relations. He is also Post-Graduated in International Cooperation by Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. After a time working for the Galician Regional Government in Consellería de Medio Rural, he joined Universidade do Porto for studying the Master in Management at the Faculty of Economics. He did an internship in App Generation Ltd Porto, and currently is working in the tourism sector.

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Abstract

Ecotourism is a term coined around three decades ago to define a vigorous component of the tourism industry. Its emergence is linked to the growing concerns about the situation of natural environment and resources in our planet. Ecotourism can be understood as an alternative way of travelling, which implies, at the same time, respect and interaction with natural resources, whilst also promotes the development of local communities.

Tourism is a dominant industry for millions of people all over the world, providing us with a huge amount of jobs and an essential part of global incomes. This sector is experiencing an important increase in its green sector, where ecotourism has emerged as the right method to minimize negative impacts of travelling on the environment, cultural heritage and indigenous population. Ecotourism is growing annually at an unprecedented rate, more than mainstream tourism, thanks to the popularization of a new kind of traveller with both greater environmental sensitivity and awareness.

The purpose of my research is acquiring a picture of travellers' profiles that are more susceptible to choose an ecotourism product, by considering their attitudes, behaviours and preferences when they are travelling. This research might be useful for the demand side of the industry, in order to provide a better understanding of ecotourism as a system. To achieve this aim, an exploratory research, quantitative in nature, is being conducted with the intention of establishing a comparison between two segments, which are considered as potential ecotourists in accordance with the previous literature examined. The information provided according to their preferences shown after completing the survey, will be important for ecotourism marketers at the time of designing and implementing future marketing campaigns.

Keywords: Ecotourism, sustainable tourism, nature-based tourism, eco-certifications

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1 Introduction

1.1 Objectives and relevance

Tourism is a dominant force for millions of people all over the world, providing us with more than 230 million jobs and over 10 percent of the gross domestic product of the planet. Tourism can be seen as a non-permanent transfer of people to different places where they normally live and work, with the purpose of varying their range of daily activities during the time they are at these temporary points (Singh et al., 2016).

Tourism is experiencing an important increase in its green sector, in line with many of the trends of the last twenty years (Juric et al., 2002). Recently, ecotourism has emerged as the right method to minimize the injurious impacts of tourist industry on the environment, cultural heritage and indigenous population. According to its growth perspectives, ecotourism is getting the opportunity of developing a promising market (Wurzinger and Johansson, 2006). It is usually reported as one of the forceful sectors within the tourism activity, providing huge revenues every year, augmenting in parallel with the emergence of a greener segment of tourists (Blangy and Metha, 2006; in Perkins and Brown, 2012). Ecotourism is growing annually at an unprecedented rate, more than mainstream tourism, thanks to the number of travellers looking for this kind of experiences has increased much more than others segments of the industry (Juric et al., 2002). It represents between 5% and 10% of the global travel market place (Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2016). Inside this world's largest economic sector, it is a solid and profitable component. It represents, currently, a robust component of national tourism economies. Countries such as Canada, Costa Rica, Australia and China are a good example, due to their wonderful ecological and landscape diversity are directly contributing to this boom (Donohoe and Needham, 2008).

It is considered that 10% of the whole international arrivals are ecotourism (Steele, 1995; in Wurzinger and Johansson, 2006), whilst its annual growth rates had been estimated between 7% and 30% by some authors at the beginning of the 21st century (Wurzinger and Johansson, 2006).

A new kind of traveller with both bigger natural awareness and commitment and also greater want for nature-based experiences and appeticeship is emerging (Page and Dowling, 2002; in Perkins and Brown, 2012). Ecotourism is seen as a sustainable development way for areas with important touristic resources, because it not only promotes environment conservation, but also the local economy (Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2016).

However, there are important doubts about if this growing popularity of ecotourism is due to the increase of concerns about the environment situation (Fennell, 1999; Page and Dowling, 2002; in Wurzinger and Johansson, 2006). Previous research normally states that people have scarce knowledge about ecotourism. This was also detected among tourism students examined by Cini et al. (2015). Connections between ecotourism awareness and survival of ecotourists' behaviour have not achieved so much attention in the literature (Moghimehfar et al., 2014). Assessing tourists environmental values would be vital for a better comprehension of the ecotourist (Sharpley, 2006). Core values are considered as better elements to explain behaviour and choices among a variety of options than beliefs or attitudes, specifically if inherent ethical component is included. Either explicitly or implicitly ecotourism has a engagement with sustainable development, involving leastways ethical factors (Perkins and Brown 2012).

Following Cini et al. (2015), there is an important gap in the literature about studies whose aim is the investigation of individuals' knowledge of ecotourism, as well as attitudes and intentions about ecotourism. In this study, the perceptions and knowledge on ecotourism of a sample of tourists are analysed, with the purpose of acquiring a picture of travellers' profile that are more susceptible to choose an ecotourism product and in order to provide a better understanding of ecotourism as a system. A deeper ecotourism knowledge achieved by visitors will increase a positive perception of the value of the ecotourist site and the positive attitudes towards ecotourism (Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2015).

1.2 Dissertation structure

This dissertation is structured as follows. A literature review is developed in section 2, covering the definition of ecotourism, ecotourists' profile, sustainability in the tourism industry, ecotourism marketing (by analysing the following issues: ecotourism in

the current context, certifications in the ecotourism industry, market segmentation in ecotourism, and seasonality in ecotourism), controversies about ecotourism, and willingness to pay a premium price for ecotourism.

In section 3, the methodology used in this study is described, by explaining how the questionnaire was elaborated, which reasons influenced the sampling strategy and the study site chosen, and how the surveys were delivered to collect the necessary data.

Section 4 makes a description of the results obtained, which are discussed in section 5; with the intention of establishing the final conclusions in section 6, in order to provide a perspective of ecotourists' profiles, which I believe will shed some light on the determination of the segments of customers willing to purchase an ecotourism product.

2 Literature review

When a person joins a nature-based activity, this experience strengthens her/his environmental attitude and biospheric value, increasing, at the same time, own engagement in both general and site-specific environmentally responsible behaviours (Lee and Jan, 2015). A natural environment offers educational and recreational benefits that allow nature-based tourists to appreciate natural sceneries (Ballantyne et al., 2011; in Lee and Jan, 2015).

It is widely accepted the requirement for a more detailed understanding of ecotourists' environmental commitment, especially when it is supposed a lack of knowledge of ecotourism (Wurzinger and Johansson, 2006), even in the travel industry and among ecotourism operators (Lew, 1998; in Wurzinger and Johansson, 2006). Although nature-based tourism is getting higher interest and increasing exponentially its revenues every year, there is still a lack of knowledge of people reasons to visit an eco-friendly destination (Prebensen and Lee, 2013). So, it would be capital for tourism planners, ecotourism marketers, and natural area managers to know if ecotourists have different characteristics than other clusters of travellers, in order to implement and develop the right marketing campaigns and frameworks for a long-term (Wurzinger and Johansson, 2006). Around half of the tourists a wetland area receives could be doing ecotourism, because apparently they are visiting a natural area, observing fauna and environment with limited pressure, at the time they learn about nature (Chirgwin and Hughes, 1997; in Wurzinger and Johansson, 2006).

2.1 Definition of ecotourism

Both ecotourists and ecotourism are associated in the literature with a considerable amount of debate (Ashton, 1991, Stafford, 1992; in Juric et al., 2002). At the time of establishing a commonly accepted definition, there is no consensus about a shared one (Donohoe and Needham, 2008). However, "such definitions converge on three key components: nature-based travel, education/interpretation, and sustainability" (Black & Cabtree, 2007; in Bustam et al., 2012, p. 86). Ecotourism can be considered within the typology of nature tourism; once, this last is catalogued as wider concept which includes all the varieties of tourism linked with the environment (Goodwin 1996; in Wurzinger and

Johansson, 2006). But, at the same time, there are some important differences between ecotourism and nature-based tourism, because this last category refers essentially to enjoy and estimate the nature. In contrast, it does not involve tenets such as sustainable development, ethical values and environmental instruction in the same way that ecotourism does (Cini et al., 2015). Ceballos-Lascurain (1990) (in Juric et al., 2002, p. 259) identified ecotourism “as that segment of tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated areas with the specific objective of admiring, studying, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural features (both past and present) found in these areas.” They also said that “the person who practices ecotourism has the opportunity of immersing him or herself in nature in a way that most people cannot enjoy in their routine, urban existences. This person will eventually acquire an awareness and knowledge of the natural environment, together with its cultural aspects, that will convert her/him into somebody keenly involved in conservation issues.”

According to the International Ecotourism Society, ecotourism is defined as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, and improves the welfare of the local people” (Bustam et al, 2012, p. 86).

Ecotourism is also defined by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (2002), as the tourism activity which is developed in a nature-based context paying attention to sustainability and, at the same time, it is considering ethical aspects as well as increase awareness toward conservation of natural and cultural assets. Ecotourism should be developed in small-scale, like small groups respecting the carrying capacity of local areas. It should support local people by providing economic benefits and job opportunities. Usually, participants are motivated by the chance of enjoying and learning about nature and local people (Wurzinger and Johansson, 2006). Similarly, ecotourism is described by Ecotourism Australia (2008) as an environmentally and socially responsible type of tourism, where nature is considered as the centre of the experience, and environmental learning is a primary goal for the tourist (Perkins and Brown, 2012). Pipinos and Fokiali (2009) understand ecotourism as a particular kind of alternative tourism closely associated with areas that are environmentally and culturally sensitive. It was developed with the intention of preventing the problems and consequences linked to traditional mass tourism.

Ecotourism is also seen as a less harmful nature tourism, which can support conditions improvement for wildlife and ecosystems, incorporating currently a committed attitude towards the environment, environmentally friendly destination management, and an important contribution to the sustainable development of local people (Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2016). Then, “the current conceptualization of ecotourism emphasizes natural conservation of a tourist site and builds on the environmental knowledge of tourists, as these tourists should keep to local regulations and behave in an environmentally responsible way that implies no harm to the natural environment” (Chiu et al., 2014; in Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2016, p. 2).

Sustainable tourism is the type of tourism that applies sustainability in any kind of travelling, including, for instance, city tourism or industrial tourism (Andereck and Vogt, 2000; Andriotis and Vaughan, 2003; in Wurzinger and Johansson, 2006). Thus, this term can be applied to all forms of tourism, whilst ecotourism refers solely to tourist experiences in nature (Wight, 2002; in Cini et al. 2015); but, at the same time, the activity is fulfilling the requirements of sustainable development, understood such as the development that meets the needs of the present without putting in risk the ability of future generations to satisfy their own needs (Bustam et al., 2012).

Table 1. Definitions of ecotourism

<i>Source</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Ceballos-Lascurain (1990)	Segment of tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated areas with the specific objective of admiring, studying, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural features (both past and present) found in these areas
International Ecotourism Society	Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, and improves the welfare of the local people
World Tourism Organization and the United Nations Environment Programme (2002)	The tourism activity which is developed in a nature-based context paying attention to sustainability and, at the same time, it is considering ethical aspects as well as increase awareness toward conservation of natural and cultural assets
Ecotourism Australia (2008)	Environmentally and socially responsible type of tourism, where nature is considered as the centre of the experience, and environmental learning is a primary goal for the tourist
Pipinos and Fokiali (2009)	A particular kind of alternative tourism closely associated with areas that are environmentally and culturally sensitive
	A less harmful nature tourism, which can support conditions improvement for wildlife and ecosystems, incorporating

Castellanos-Verdugo et al. (2016)	currently a committed attitude towards the environment, environmentally friendly destination management, and an important contribution to the sustainable development of local people
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2.2 Ecotourists' profile

Ecotourists are considered as a subset of environmentally friendly tourists that engages in responsible travel which conserves natural environs. They are defined by their interest in nature-based activities, whereas the typology of environmentally friendly tourists itself can exist across all tourism consumer contexts, as long as we refer to tourists with low environmental footprint at the destination (Dolnicar et al., 2008). Thus, ecotourists are usually more nature oriented than human oriented, and they see clear limits on Earth to sustain growth (Wurzinger and Johansson 2006). The biospheric value orientation seems to be closer to an ecocentric or biospheric perception of the value of nature that recognizes the importance of the well-being of nature for its own sake. Thus, an ecocentric view of nature is considered as a more accurate determiner of pro-environmental behaviour and attitudes than the anthropocentric view (Schultz et al., 2005; in Perkins and Brown, 2012). Ecotourists are not only interested in culture and environmental conservation, but also in wilderness and nature experiences and learning. They have the will of experiencing the nature and environmental conservation, apart from their desire to relax and escape (Juric et al., 2002).

Supposedly, ecotourists are concerned with satiating a belief that the activities they are doing have a positive environmental and social-cultural benefits and, they also would be concerned with achieving a higher social status as a result of their environmental awareness (Duffy, 2002; in Donohoe and Needham, 2008).

Attempts to understand and distinguish ecotourism from other tourism activities usually rely on the analysis of its participants. Ecotourists are considered as the ones who are committed to responsible, educational and nature-based travel experiences and to comprehensively researching and organising their trips. Some authors describe this type of tourists as affluent, well educated, well-travelled and also the one who have a relatively

high income (Epler Wood, 2002; McKercher, 2001; in Donohoe and Needham, 2008). Perkins and Brown (2012) state there is significant evidence of the distinction between the true ecotourist and the mainstream tourist, on the basis of their respective value systems.

It is supposed to be a mistake considering that most ecotourists are anything different from consumers; so, their main target would be the consumption of an ecotourism experience (McKercher 1993; in Juric et al., 2016). The emphasis on nature is the essential common element shared by the compound of ecotourist definitions that Juric et al. (2002) examined. They discard culture as the basis for ecotourism experience, seeing best described these tourists as “someone who, while interested in culture and in protecting the environment, is primarily interested in travelling to experience and learn about wilderness and undisturbed nature” (Juric et al., 2002, p. 260).

Weaver and Lawton (2002) identified two types of ecotourists, so, harder ecotourists would be those characterized by being physically active, making longer trips by travelling in smaller groups to less accessible and more untouched areas, whilst expecting fewer services. Thus, these travellers express more ecocentric attitudes than softer ecotourists, given that this last group shares more similarities with mass tourism in terms of volume, purpose of travel, reliance on an infrastructure of services, and expected guidance. Similarly, Mehmetoglu (2005) points out hard ecotourists as those who are able to show specific information about nature activities; whereas, soft ecotourists integrate a group which shares the characteristic of having a general idea about nature activities in which they are involved.

Following Sharpley (2006), ecotourism participants should not be necessarily categorized as ecotourists, given that there is a complex heterogeneity of motivations to buy an ecotourism package. The reason is the existence of a mixing of so-called true ecotourists with occasional ecotourism consumers who are mainly looking for a new experience, or as a means for acquiring social status (Duffy, 2002; Wheeler, 2005; in Perkins and Brown, 2012). Thus, true ecotourists could be defined as consumers with a particular interest in experiencing and learning about nature in a direct way with the own commitment to the protection and conservation of natural and cultural environments (Sharpley, 2006).

Ecotourists are a relatively small subset of tourists, but representing clear differences from conventional travellers; because they have a strong commitment and interests in the environment and enjoy interacting with nature. However, travel motivations of ecotourists not only differ with usual travellers, but also among the category of ecotourists itself, which has an important component of heterogeneity as a mark of identity (Galley and Clifton, 2003).

The analysis of travellers by their tourism consumption systems allows managers to determine different customer segments on demographics, trip behaviour, activities' preferences and feedback about satisfaction achieved versus satisfaction expected. Demographic variables might not only play the role of determining variables of travel intention and behaviour, but also perform as qualifying or constraining variables (Kattiyapornpong and Miller, 2008).

There was, in the past, a lack of consensus about which age average is more frequent among ecotourists (White, 2002). This author (White) developed a study about North American ecotourists, finding that experienced ecotourists were normally older (the most repeated segment was between 35 and 54 years old) than conventional tourists (with a highlighted segment from 25 to 44 years old). However, it is argued that younger generation is usually more concerned about environmental issues than their predecessors (Esparon et al., 2014).

According to the gender, both (male and female) are sharing the same interest in the overall range of ecotourism activities. Differences are only found for specific activities, and they are not following a tight pattern, but varying over time (White, 2002). However, some studies conclude that the majority of ecotourists are female (Galley and Clifton, 2003).

Education and income level of experienced ecotourists tends to be much higher than general travellers (White, 2002; Galley and Clifton, 2003); thus, around 82 % were college graduated, although, ecotourism experiences are getting more interest among people with less education (White, 2002).

2.3 Sustainability in the tourism industry

After some decades of studies, two main solutions have emerged to improve the environmental sustainability of local tourism: ecotourism and sustainable tourism. In the field of sustainable tourism, research was mainly focused on supply-side measures and it can be useful for destination management in order to reduce the negative environmental side effects of the tourism industry. All the feasible improvement measures detected for sustainable tourism share the common root of being implemented at the destination itself and can therefore being referred to as supply-side measures (Dolnicar and Leisch, 2008). The focus of research has tended to concentrate more intensively on the supply characteristics (Sharpley, 2006). Supply-side measures take the tourists as given and try to modify their behaviour once at their destinations (Dolnicar, 2006), by implementing regulations on businesses, capacity restrictions or initiatives to educate tourists and stimulate pro-environmental behaviour (Dolnicar et al., 2008). Deeper investigation of the motivation of the ecotourist would be mandatory for developing a more accurate insight into the demand side of the equation (Dolnicar and Leisch, 2008). Therefore, demand-driven measures were defined such as those ones which identify tourists with a small ecological footprint and try to attract them to a destination instead of taking for granted the kind of tourists who arrives at the destination. These demand-driven approaches might be a valuable extension of the sustainable tourism management framework, because they are in line with the profit maximisation goal of tourism industry and, the demand side is crucial to sustainable tourism management due to consumer demand coerces tourism businesses to achieve eco-certifications (Dolnicar et al., 2008). Perkins and Brown (2012) stated that biospheric values and environmental beliefs are essential predictors either for the preference of green accreditation systems, or for the intention to purchase accredited products in the tourism market. Concerns about one's personal impact and support for tourism products eco-certifications seem to be remarkable indicators of commitment to responsible and environmentally sensitive tourism.

Meanwhile, ecotourism is oriented to a highly demand-side or demand-driven concept due to tourists who are interested in a particular type of holidays experience (mostly nature based) are the target. These tourists have important concerns about nature cares and needs, and try to leave a smaller ecological footprint than conventional tourists. This concept is very promising as naturally existing demand (here related with nature-

based tourism) can be very useful for tourism suppliers to match tourism offers. Until now, this demand-driven approach is only collected in the context of ecotourism, and little information is still available about characteristics and behaviours of environmentally friendly tourists (Dolnicar and Leisch, 2008).

Identifying and focusing on tourists with low ecological footprints could be a smart alternative strategy for sustainable destination management approach. Destination managers still do not have clear information about tourists who have low ecological footprints (Dolnicar et al., 2008).

Selective marketing is suggested as a strategy to improve environmental sustainability at the destination (Inskeep, 1991; in Dolnicar and Leisch, 2008). New Zealand tourism businesses which offer environmentally friendly travelling are developing products for a new segment of tourists which has these demands and has recently emerged (Ataljevic and Doorne, 2000; in Dolnicar and Leisch, 2008). The term biocentric segments was introduced to define those visitors with highly pro-environmental attitudes. This segment would be distinctly profiled with respect to sociodemographics, interest in ecolabels, intended use of ecolabels and willingness to pay a price premium for environment-friendly accommodation (Fairweather et al., 2005; in Dolnicar et al., 2008). Willingness to pay a premium price for ecotourism is not only a matter of human behaviours are endangering the planet, but also of tourists' perceptions about conservation behaviours (Kazeminia et al., 2016). It is supposed that there are environmentally friendly tourists in every tourism context, so, they could be actively targeted in order to minimize the ecological footprint of tourism (Dolnicar, 2006).

People who usually choose ecotourism-related holidays have differences in motivation and psychology from those who are more interested in mainstream holidays. Thus, travellers who place higher value on the natural environment for its own sake enjoy having a closer interaction with nature and be more interested in ecotourism products (Perkins and Brown, 2012). Usually, nature-based tourists are those who appraise emotional angles of enjoying the natural environment (Pebersen and Lee, 2013). At the same time, managers of nature-based tourism destinations should offer educational recreation activities to foster tourists' biospheric values and environmental attitudes (Lee

and Jan, 2015), because the value of an eco-friendly destination depends on the meaning is offering to the tourists (Pebersen and Lee, 2013).

Following Castellanos-Verdugo et al. (2016), both knowledge of ecotourism and attitudes towards ecotourism are determining the perceived value of the tourist product or destination, which is the key to predict ecotourist satisfaction. Also, by providing a pleasant experience and interaction with the natural environment during an ecotourism activity, companies are improving pro-environmental attitudes and willingness to pay a premium price for this kind of products (Kazeminia et al., 2016).

Environmental values are sustained by individuals regarding the relationship between individuals and their natural environment, evolving from pure anthropocentric to pure biocentric, and ecocentric. These values highlight the importance of respecting all life forms and natural systems guaranteeing them the same rights than humans have (Lück, 2003; in Lu et al., 2016). Biospheric values influence in a positive and significant way the general environmental responsible behaviour of nature-based tourists, extending our knowledge about tourism and supporting environmentally responsible tourism (Lee and Jan, 2015). On the other hand, preoccupation with material goods might prevent the assumption of environmental values. Thus, those materialistic individuals, who prioritize acquisition and consumption, usually are less likely to show favourable attitudes and commitment to ecotourism (Lu et al., 2016).

Moghimehfar et al. (2014) studied mountain hikers' knowledge of ecotourism and ecotourism practices in central Iran. They observed an important difference between behaviour and awareness of ecotourism practice and; also, higher levels of engagement in ecotourism behaviour due to environmental impacts than self-achieved knowledge about ecotourism. These authors believe that this phenomenon could be based both on human emotional affinity or connectivity with nature. At the same time, they did not find significant differences in ecotourism knowledge and behaviour among different education levels, but also their research stated the idea that there is a positive connection between hiking or outdoor recreation experience and knowledge of ecotourism and sustainable behaviour.

2.4 Ecotourism marketing

2.4.1 Ecotourism in the current context

The internet is providing a new and important electronic commerce system for tourism, and its use for planning leisure travel has become a world-wide tourism trend and the most important industry in terms of electronic commerce or e-commerce volume. In the case of ecotourism, it provides the most important marketing mechanism and the main explanation to its rapid growth (Donohoe & Needham, 2008); where word-of-mouth communication is also an important determiner of tourists' destination choices, because, sometimes, this kind of interactions in forums and websites are more credible than advertising campaigns (Simpson and Siguaw, 2008). Promotion of tourism on the internet is acquiring a tremendous growth thanks to its convenience, cost-effectiveness, and competitive advantage offered. Internet has become one of the main channels to buy travel companies products, also because it offers essential references from customers who trusted in the same operator before. By observing the way ecotourism companies are positioning themselves on the internet, we can get an accurate perspective about what role ecotourism education is playing in their businesses (Bustam et al., 2012).

However, some authors defend the thesis that most ecotourism companies do not mention or explain properly the sustainability principles on their online promotion (Bustam et al., 2012). Others who also have studied ecotourism, consider that the term itself is being used such as a marketing strategy; by an abuse and misuse of the concept to attract conservation conscious tourists to nature based tourism under the slogan of ecotourism, and usually generating negative environmental and social impacts. Others, due to the lack of a shared ecotourism definition, have showed concerns about the increasing gap between ecotourism theory and practise, leading to the uselessness of the concept. Inconsistency in the definition of ecotourism has not allowed the use of the concept in practical terms. So, the implementation of global and national principles to lead ecotourism activities would be essential to guarantee the successful development of ecotourism locations (Cobbinah, 2015).

Marketing is defined by the American Marketing Association “as an organizational function and set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to

customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders” (Bustam et al., 2012, p. 89).

But tourism, as a consequence of this definition itself, and ecotourism as the activity included in this wider sector, have a different marketing process compared with other industries. Thus, as long as we can consider tourism products as intangible goods, quality control is not easy to be assessed. Peculiarities are also stressed by the facts that customers should travel to purchase the products, instead of bringing them to the customers, and many activities are involved in a single trip or product (Singh et al., 2016).

During the last three decades, the discussion on ecotourism has increased its attention, either in conferences or journals, with the definitional interpretations being broadened to incorporate ethical issues or normative components. Thus, it is fair that ecotourism pursues environmental conservation, local cultures protection and delivering benefits to both tourists and host communities (Cobbinah, 2015). Tourists' arrival works as a drive for other activities, increasing their revenue and diversifying the portfolio of local companies. It has been also defended the viewpoint that, in some locations, ecotourism activity is much more profitable than other activities like agriculture (Singh et al., 2016).

Until recent times, no essential information about ecotourism market demand was achieved. To begin with, many times, travel companies are in charge of determining if a travel activity or location can be considered as an ecotourism experience or, in contrast, a conventional one. However, we should consider, that many ecotourists are not hiring a tour operator services to be involved in an ecotourism experience. On the contrary, they do it by being independent travellers (White, 2002).

The fact of putting in risk the culture and daily habits of local communities should be eradicated as a result of the ecotourism activity, as well as pernicious intentions of overcapacity, which can cause irreparable harm on the environment (Singh et al., 2016).

It is also widely accepted in the literature that while sustainable development remains at the core of ecotourism in developed countries, poverty reduction is the main target in developing countries. Then, we can see how, in some cases, ecotourism is linked to poverty reduction and local development (Cobbinah, 2015). Ecotourism is a singular

kind of tourism which focuses on the improvement of natural environment and provides economic alternatives for local communities (Ban and Ramsaran, 2016).

Cobbinah (2015) has conducted a research about ecotourism in a developing country, Ghana; concluding that ecotourism principles oriented towards achieving social goals in the local community are not usually recognised. He also promotes further collaboration and coordination to clarify and implement the key principles of ecotourism, also at the host community level. Otherwise, feelings like frustration and reluctance could appear in local residents, expanding negative attitudes towards the discipline and damaging its status.

White (2002) stated that many travellers are interested in varied travel experience, namely, trips which include an ecotourism portion during their holidays, but also incorporating non-ecotourism experiences into the journey as a whole. So, ecotourism marketers should be smart enough to fulfill the needs of these customers, at the time they should be aware of the incorporation of experienced ecotourists into mainstream markets.

2.4.2 Certifications in the ecotourism industry

A certification scheme represents the guarantee that travel operators respect sustainability, and socio-cultural and economic issues according to the ecotourism tenets, at the time of developing their business activity (Bustam et al., 2012). It is considered as a symbol of high product quality and an indicator of environmental and social respect. In the tourism industry, a certification ensures that a specific product, activity or service satisfies some established rules, deserving the achievement of a logo or seal (Haaland and Aas, 2010); and acting as an essential sustainable tourism management tool (Esparon et al., 2014).

The number of environmental certifications and labels has grown exponentially lately. One of the consequences of this phenomenon is the difficulty of distinguishing among this mixture of eco-accreditations, fact that can be associated with an important lack of credibility (Haaland and Aas, 2010). Proliferation and multiplicity of certification schemes confuse customers. Even for experienced ecotourists is not easy to identify certification logos they see (Esparon et al., 2014). To restore eco-certifications'

functionality, a tighter control and assessment would be requested (Haaland and Aas, 2010).

It is widely accepted that governments should interfere in the regulation of the ecotourism industry (Singh et al., 2016). However, there is the traditional perspective which considers the tourism industry as relatively free from regulations. Establishing a suitable and periodically assessed certification system could mitigate the need for severe regulations, whilst provides the industry with important advantages (Haaland and Aas, 2010). So, matching both the environmental and economic growth objectives would be crucial, especially for developing countries. The implementation of a suitable system of certifications would be the right strategy to ensure sustainability in this sector, because it would help tourist in their decision-making process by identifying those opportunistic tourism companies which are trying to take advantage from promoting themselves as proper ecotourism providers, whilst they do not care at all about the tenets of this activity. Although with some exceptions, like Australia, Costa Rica and Sweden, most of the countries do not have an internal standard to award ecotourism certificates (Singh et al., 2016). Thus, Sweden and Australia could be considered as the models where private business and public power have established a clear interaction and collaboration during the phase of certification scheme implementation, evolving afterwards towards a working system run by private organizations. On the other hand, Costa Rica represents the paradigm of assumption of responsibilities by government authorities within this process (Haaland and Aas, 2010). There is also the same lack of consensus in the international scope, because although there are a large amount of them, none is mandatory and regulated by an official international body, and most of eco-certifications are being awarded by private tourism organizations (Singh et al., 2016).

An ecotourism certificate should ensure that the product or location suits the specific standards required by the industry; given that it is understood as a mark of high product quality and its commitment with the tenets of the activity; including also indicators of social and economic sustainability, besides those that guarantee its environmental engagement (Singh et al., 2016).

Currently, according to the UN World Tourism Organization, 2 of every 3 eco-certificates are not public powers competence, being determined and awarded by private

tourism organizations (Haaland and Aas, 2010). Singh et al. (2016) highlights the obligatoriness of eco-certifications, otherwise, many ecotourism-based companies may opt for not joining the certification scheme. Thus, the implementation of a fair and global certification framework should seek the target of planning, marketing and sustaining a model of ecotourism that guarantees tangible benefits to the four parts included in this interaction: local communities, tourists, environment and the ecotourism businesses. Cultural, social, and behavioural differences are an important barrier to save at the time of implementing a global certification system, so, local and regional particularities should be having into account to ensure a good performance and reception of the process.

By being awarded with an ecotourism certification, companies can get important advantages. On the one hand, normally ecotourism operator will have access either to technical assistance or financing for new technology provided by the certification agency in charge (Bustam et al., 2012).

On the other hand, a suitable certification system is particularly useful for marketing departments, because they can target easily the ideal segment of customers, increasing the chances of fulfilling their needs (Singh et al., 2016); and they are achieving important marketing opportunities as a result of showing themselves as a right certified business, which is easily seen as a sign of quality brand (Bustam et al., 2012). Companies can achieve competitive advantages by showing environmental concerns and supporting conservation causes (Kazeminia et al., 2016). So, a fluid dialectic process between certification agency and tourism industry will revert positively in the sector, preventing also the emergence of the harmful phenomenon of greenwashing (Singh et al., 2016). This is the main treat for the ecotourism certification process, and it has been accentuated by the credibility erosion caused by its lack of external assessment; given that, usually, the same organization is in charge of handling the marketing, the applications for certification and also the responsibility of conceding those awards. This absence of external audit is often justified by its high cost. Also, the structure of the ecotourism industry itself is not helping in this sense, because there are a huge number of small businesses in the market and no legal regulation which rules this scope. So, most of the companies can opt for trying to maximize their sales volume, by using the lax interpretation of the certification scheme in the manner it is providing the biggest amount of profit in the short term; starting, there, a vicious circle which is provoking an extensive damage not only in the certification

system, but also in the industry survival. So, the mentioned example of Australia would be a right mirror to find a solution (Haaland and Aas, 2010).

At the time of considering the applicability of ecotourism certifications is particularly important to check if either customers or local residents are aware about the certification itself, and the advantages and value which are providing them with. Otherwise, the certification could be converted is something totally inoperable. Education is seen as the main weapon to consolidate customers and residents certification awareness. It plays an important role on the ecotourism activity, given that it fosters the empathy with the natural environment and its needs. So, it acts as the guarantee to ensure that sustainability is present as an essential factor in ecotourism, contributing also to increase cognitive awareness about environmental and cultural issues; although it did not achieved the required attention in previous academic research (Bustam et al., 2012).

To ensure the success of the certification process is important to gather a multidisciplinary team in the planning phase. Also this stage should be leaded by an organization proceeding from the tourism industry, namely, with a huge background on how the tourism and travel market is working. Tourism governmental authorities should support the implementation of the certification scheme, but being careful with not taking an excessive role, which could compromise their natural position. Certification systems need to be financially viable by themselves, in order to show a commitment with credibility (Haaland and Aas, 2010); which, respectively, will have a positive impact on the increase of customer loyalty, by focusing on maintaining customer satisfaction (Esparon et al., 2014). At the same time, criteria must be considered as the most important piece of certifications scheme machinery and it needs to be constantly assessed. So, in a similar manner than the previously mentioned process of planning, gathering an efficient and wide squad of professionals is mandatory. Problems can appear either when operating with certificates at different levels or by certificating products or activities instead of the whole company; because if the applicant is getting a single eco-certificate, even the lowest, it can be wrongly used to export the vision that the whole business is certified, claiming again for greenwashing arrival (Haaland and Aas, 2010).

Bustam et al. (2012) argued that environmental education is usually implemented by interpretive products, which are characterized by being conducted as a type of

educational effort that reveals the links hidden beyond diverse environmental issues. Thus, interpretation basically operates by simplifying the reality in order to facilitate understanding of environmental, cultural and social themes, at the time that could be considered as a useful tool to explain the advantages and benefits of ecotourism, and to support its sustainability over time. Developing outstanding world-class experiences should be pursued by ecotourism operators to gain competitive advantage in the market (Ban and Ramsaran, 2016).

However, according to Bustam et al. (2012), education is not playing the role it deserves in the process of ecotourism certification. There is not enough attention about education criteria at the time of examining ecotourism providers looking for certifications. In a similar manner, ecotourism certification scheme has not achieved success on creating the customers' required awareness about its advantages, imperative condition to show its efficiency, which is perceptible through its lack of influence at the time of determining travellers' preferences. Customers should be educated to distinguish the differences between an eco-certified company or destination and a non-eco-certified one (Ban and Ramsaran, 2016). Surprisingly, it is also found, after analysing internet promotion of ecotourism operators, that those non-certified are paying more attention to educational issues in their marketing online than the eco-certified ones. Thus, non-certified ecotourism operators show clearer commitment with education and include a more detailed description of the topic on their websites; although, usually, the opposite would be predicted (Bustam et al., 2012).

Travellers not only need to know what a company is offering, but also how an eco-certification is supporting sustainability (Ban and Ramsaran, 2016). Following Bustam et al. (2012), this unexpected lack of commitment with education, showed by certified operators could be explained by the fact that, as I have mentioned before, the certification standards do not consider this issue as one of the most important factors at the time of awarding their candidates. On the other hand, non-certified operators would understand much better the essential role of education on the ecotourism activity, as well as its advantages. This phenomenon would imply a breakdown in the certification system itself, given that communicating education through marketing tools is essential to insert sustainability praxis on the core of ecotourism activity.

2.4.3 Market segmentation in ecotourism

Market segmentation is well-accepted as an essential tool in strategic marketing, because it allows determine needs and preferences of consumer subgroups, which share important characteristics. Basically, this process consists on dividing a heterogeneous market in different smaller markets which share the same characteristics and, potentially, the same product preferences. By doing a deep exam of our market structure we can identify the most attractive market segments to match their potential and needs with the strengths of our company or organization (Dolnicar, 2004). So, detecting different segments existing in the eco-tourism market is the essential first stage to do a successful promotion (Mehmetoglu, 2005). Traditionally, two main approaches have been used to segment consumer populations: a priori and data-driven (a posteriori, post hoc) segmentation. Priori segmentation has represented the foremost method within the tourism industry. However, because of this too widespread utilization, there are important doubts about competitive advantage achieved by this framework implementation (Dolnicar, 2004).

Marketing strategies should attract segments of tourists which are profitable and most feasible to choose their products, having into account the heterogeneity of tourism market. In order to implement a convenient segmentation, each segment has to be accessible, measurable, and substantial (Tkaczynski et al., 2015).

In the marketing field, having a baseline rating of the target market's ecotourism interest would be useful before preparing marketing programs. Thus, tourist product development could be adapted to the consumer's preferences determined, in some way, by the consumer's level of interest in ecotourism (Juric et al., 2002). The purpose of market segmentation is determining visible characteristics of the purchasing behaviour subgroups, which can be predicted and targeted. Usually, a double segmentation is implemented, as follows. The first segment is defined, according to the socially descriptive data available, and compared with a characteristic kind of purchasing behaviour, which will identify the second segment. Superposition between these two segments should be able to be predicted (Johns and Gyimóthy, 2002).

At the time of planning a travel, diverse factors interact between the impressions of the destination and own motivations. Among these factors, environmental, cultural and

contextual influences are included. At a micro-level, the final choice would be mix between personality and lifestyle of the individual, whilst macro-level conditions are a consequence of culture influences. Thus, tourists usually select destinations which fulfill their preferences, by suiting their own picture of the destination. As a result, determination of tourists preferences is an essential part for implementing a right marketing strategy (Prebensen and Lee, 2013), which should be oriented in one or another way depending on inner needs and motivations of travellers (Mehmetoglu, 2005).

Ecotourism managers should figure out which are the more determinant variables to generate word-of-mouth communication, with the intention of targeting efficiently those segments which can impact positively on this channel of communication. This is why, some segments of customers are more willing to promote either a company or a destination by word-of-mouth communication and, also, there is not a homogeneous behaviour at the time of being influenced by the references provided by others. Ecotourism products and destinations can achieve competitive advantage if former travellers act as their promoters, launching more credible and trustable messages than expensive advertising campaigns which are designed by marketing departments. Word-of-mouth communication is getting special relevance in the current context, given that one single review on a website, forum,... can be seen by a huge number of potential customers; fostering the power of the internet as one of the most important diffusion channels for ecotourism. Consequently, managers should pay attention to word-of-mouth communication, owing to its close relationship with customer loyalty. Thus, customer satisfaction is a necessary but insufficient condition to strengthen this link (Simpson and Siguaw, 2008).

It is commonly accepted that nature-based tourists and, hence, ecotourists, as a group within the larger cluster of nature-based tourists, do not represent a homogeneous group. There are different perceptions on environmental issues, according their environmental concerns and attitudes (Prebensen and Lee, 2013). Precisely, this condition of heterogeneity among ecotourists is the main reason for demanding the implementation of market segmentation, which enables tourism destinations and operators to achieve the required competitive advantage (Dolnicar, 2004). Consequently, due to this heterogeneous character, ecotourism marketers should focus on market segmentation for two reasons. First, it has the aptitude to determine those segments of customers that can provide the

highest income, so, we are talking about the intention of maximizing financial yield. Secondly, another reason for implementing market segmentation is its usefulness as a tool to discover the ideal visitor types who maximize sustainable yield instead of only financial yield. This motivation is interesting for managers, at the time of defining segments of customers with lower environmental and social footprints and assisting them to maximize the positive incidence of tourism (Nickerson et al., 2016).

By doing a psychographic differentiation, Mehmetoglu (2005) classified, in his study, Norwegians nature-travellers in two categories: specialists and generalists. The first group needs little infrastructure and management facilities, adopting their presence to the actual support systems. In contrast, generalists show less ambition, are not too interested in the special characteristics of the location, require a well-developed infrastructure and join relatively big groups of tourists. To sum up, specialist travel mainly for nature, and generalists also for other reasons besides nature, but no differences were found between these two segments according to their respective travel mode, trip expenses or trip satisfaction. Nevertheless, the first distinction between ecotourists specialists and generalists was established according to their respective trip duration; considering specialists those that enroll a recreational activity during more than seven days, and generalists during less than 48 hours (White, 2002). As was stated before in this study, internet is, nowadays, the main marketing tool for ecotourism. Consequently, a website for a nature-based or ecotourist company and destination should have the accurate design to guide each segment of customers to the right place; namely, foreign tourists to specialist sections, and the domestic (Norwegian) market to generalist contents (Mehmetoglu, 2005).

Prebensen and Lee (2013) found in their research, that social recognition and self-realisation are important motivations for French and British tourists, whilst Swedes and Norwegians are more interested on being in and using the nature; at the time of choosing to visit an eco-friendly destination, testing that motivations for nature-based travelling derives from cultural philosophy, having different meanings depending on the country of origin. Similarly, geographical and cultural remoteness of holiday destination are essential influences on the selection of a nature-based holiday. Among Europeans, longer distances are increasing the feeling of uniqueness, novelty and desire to tell others about own

experiences. On the other hand, closeness is fostering the will of deeper interaction with nature.

2.4.4 Seasonality in ecotourism

Joining activities different from travellers usual lifestyle which provide pleasant feelings, acts as one of the most essential elements at the time of choosing potential holidays destinations. These kinds of activities usually are influenced by temporal factors and, consequently, tourist preferences about these nature-based activities are oriented towards peak seasons. For this reason, tourism marketers should focus on maximizing income during this time, in order to be able to make profitable their businesses throughout the year, especially in low season. So, businesses should be adapted in order to be able to live with seasonality, by minimizing its effects with strategies like market diversification and the implementation of alternative products, which can enable to target new market segments during other seasons of the year. Non-seasonal activities are a smart way of attracting tourists on a yearly basis, with the intention of maximizing revenue potential by making viable enterprises and destinations during off-peak periods (Tkaczynski et al., 2015).

Although seasonality is accounted as one of the capital elements of the tourism industry, especially for predicting tourism demand (Tkaczynski et al., 2015); there is no huge research about seasonality preference of ecotourism travellers, in spite of, it is clear than either conventional tourists or ecotourists normally prefer to travel in summer months. However, due to the fact ecotourist are more frequent travellers, they are more willing to travel in winter and low season than general tourists; issue which should be taken into account by ecotourism marketers, because it is fostering the industry potential, spreading the season of operations (White, 2002).

By analysing temporal factors, such as seasonality, marketers can achieve greater dose of efficiency, at the time of segmenting their potential customers. Identifying the most attractive activities that one specific destination provides for travellers is one of the main tasks for managers, given that it is conditioning the probability that tourists choose this destination as the one which best satisfies their wants. This is why, is essential to

figure out potential activity preferences before potential travel, allowing to know what is considered as enjoyable and desirable for tourists (Tkaczynski et al., 2015).

2.5 Controversies about ecotourism

One of the major threats for ecotourism is the development of marketing strategies based on the promotion of a vision of sustainability that relies on expanding consumption of green products through a deeply profit orientation led by global corporation, a reality confronted itself with the essential meaning of ecotourism (Braun et al., 2015). There are many examples where ecotourism implementation, in the end, benefits external stakeholders instead of local communities (Wang et al., 2016).

There are also two important conceptions about ecotourism which should be distinguished: high-value ecotourism, versus high-volume. Then, high-volume would be the version which is similar to mass tourism in its orientation toward facilitating a large number of tourist experiences, with little focus on interaction or connection with local people. On the other hand, high-value bets for experiences which engage tourists with local communities, pursuing for learning about these local habits and ways of life. So, the purpose of the ecotourism industry should be establishing the right mechanisms to avoid the emergence of the greenwashing phenomenon, which can be associated with very bad impacts for the sustainability of the sector. Thus, it is a potential threat that some multinational corporations can try to take advantage of ecotourism success, by implementing sophisticated marketing strategies; which are removing the differences between ecotourism and mass tourism. Also, because of the power and influence of foreign investment, indigenous and non-elite local people are often missing in the first stages of the decision-making process, which is usually essential to determine future development of the process of ecotourism in one specific area. In this sense, tighter governmental regulation would be useful to make sure local communities are getting the part they deserve from benefits generated by ecotourism activity (Braun et al., 2015).

Ecotourism and other sustainable tourism varieties should not be seen as a panacea per se, if they do not pursue clearly the implementation of ethics and values in the tourism sector (Wang et al., 2016). Occasionally, the traditional perception about the economic benefits ecotourism provides to local communities is questioned, because, although

promotes environmental sustainability; ecotourism would foster pre-existing patterns of stratification and economic inequalities (Horton, 2009; in Braun et al., 2015). Other negative impacts that could be blamed to ecotourism are increases in solid waste, disturbances to natural habitats or trail erosion (Stem et al., 2003; Gould and Lewis, 2009; in Braun et al., 2015).

It is said that since the important growth of ecotourism in the 1980s, there is an important gap between its theoretical objectives and its practical materialization. To avoid dysfunctionalities, ecotourism should pay attention to its two main goals, both environmental conservation and promotion of local development. More often than that, in developing countries, it is prioritizing environmental conservation against local development; creating an adverse atmosphere among indigenous people, which is translated in a lack of involvement in ecotourism activities, eroding, there, the core of ecotourism meaning itself. Ecotourism developers must have into account this activity also should provide opportunities for addressing local development challenges, fostering the local involvement in order to keep a right sustainability perspective (Cobbinah et al., 2015). Likewise, to implement a sustainable ecotourism enterprise, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the cultural politics of governance and participation at the local scope; with the intention of providing livelihood alternatives for an important part of the local population (Wang et al., 2016).

In sum, following Cobbinah et al. (2015), participation by host communities is essential to promote ecotourism success; which can emerge after developing an administrative framework for implementing ecotourism and the establishment of strong relationships among stakeholders. So, implementation of ecotourism, which must be understood as a hard political set of interactions, is closely linked to the creation of a solid administrative framework, oriented towards the solution of stakeholders' needs in the pursuit of different socio-economic and environmental conservation outcomes.

By having into account political issues and values associated with the execution of ecotourism at the local level, we will achieve a clearer perspective of the guidelines to establish a sustainable model of economic development for unprotected communities; which will require some years of preliminary actions before the final and successful scheme has been materialized (Wang et al., 2016). However, some research considers

that benefits provided by ecotourism are not enough to balance its negative impacts, such as limited engagement of host communities. At the same time, negative environmental effects should not be forgotten either; being hard for local communities the experience of theoretical benefits of ecotourism as it is announced in its definition (Cobbinah et al., 2015). For instance, one of more remarkable environmental critique against ecotourism is the increase it is causing on extensive use of resources, especially those allocated to overseas transportation, closely linked with large CO2 emissions, as a result of the growth in number of ecotourism travellers (Haaland and Aas, 2010).

2.6 Willingness to pay a premium price for ecotourism

It has been widely accepted by several studies that willingness to pay for public offerings, like ecotourism, is a consequence of individual decisions following rational rules. So, in this sense, the decision of purchasing a more expensive ecotourism product instead of a conventional one would depend on economic preferences for personal and non-personal benefits achieved as a result of consumption or preservation of the tourism offering itself. Thus, the amount of money a person is willing to pay for an ecotourism product depends on also from sensations the traveller is expecting to experience from the action, not only from beliefs about the advantages of preserving the environment (Kazeminia et al., 2016).

It is important paying attention to the value of word-of-mouth as a way of promotion, given that positive messages sent by friends and relatives about a product can be stronger than any other kind of marketing strategy. Customers who identify themselves with a company are more likely to prompt it through word-of-mouth communication. Satisfied travellers usually give good references from a company or destination by three different reasons: altruism, for instance the intention of helping others; instrumentalism, when they are attempting to seem travel wise; or by cognitive dissonance reduction, reassuring themselves and the rest of travellers about destination selection (Simpson and Siguaw, 2008). Similarly, Kazeminia et al. (2016) also state that previous experience develops attitudes based on affective issues. There, when feelings anticipated from certain behaviour are enjoyable, people usually adopt an auspicious attitude, being susceptible to pay price premiums to repeat the mentioned feeling. On the whole, ecotourists are usually

considered as a higher-spending group, with, also, a higher-than-average income (White, 2002). So, although, theoretically, some studies have argued that a segment of tourists are willing to pay a premium price for greener products, this assertion has not translated into practical terms. There is still not a clear demand for certified sustainable tourism products (Esparon et al., 2014). On the contrary, although recognizing that there are still gaps on knowledge about sustainable tourists' expenditures, and after analysing visitors' spending patterns in Montana (USA), Nickerson et al. (2016) conclude that sustainable travellers constitutes a market with a huge potential of profitability within the tourism industry, thanks to the interaction between their pro-sustainable behaviour and high spending manners. Thus, they found that sustainable tourists are willing to spend more money than conventional travellers. This fact also supposes a great economic impulse to the will of local communities for preserving their locations in the traditional and original way, promoting what is already there and makes it unique.

Kazeminia et al. (2016) research concludes that there is an important negative effect of materialistic values on willingness to pay a premium price the group with the deepest interest in ecotourism. On the whole, maximization of enjoyment during holidays and reduction of costs are considered as a priority for travellers, clearly before the adoption of sustainability practices (Esparon et al., 2014). Strategies should be directed to reducing materialistic values, if the target of environmental policy seeks for turning environmentally harmful consumption attitudes into environmental sensitive ones (Kazeminia et al. 2016). Materialistic tenets are those linked to the assumption that acquiring a bigger amount of goods is directly related and fostering happiness (Richins, 1994).

Whilst affective and cognitive elements play a positive role on developing a willingness to pay a premium price for ecotourism, interest in ecotourism attractions mitigates this trend, twisting the balance of emotion and cognition towards the influence of affects. So, ecotourism marketers should pursue the goal of promoting emotional ties to attractions among potential customers (Kazeminia et al., 2016); especially, because, in White (2002) words, ecotourists are willing to pay a bigger amount of money than conventional tourists.

Likewise, conventional way of promoting ecotourism products by businesses to consumers (B2C) has shown an important lack of efficiency, and it should be replaced by a business-to-business (B2B) approach focused on the promotion of certification programs. In this sense, a better understanding among customers about what certification represents is required, to foster their confidence in the quality of products that a right certification scheme assures (Esparon et al., 2014).

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research is acquiring a picture of travellers preferences related with ecotourism, which might be useful for the demand side of the industry, in order to provide a better understanding of ecotourism as a system (Perkins and Brown, 2012), by identifying needs and preferences of ecotourists segments and, there, easing the development of marketing strategies. In a similar manner, given that competitive advantage provided by market structure analysis on the ecotourism field has not been efficient enough; because studies has been oriented towards tourists preferences determination by their simple description according to commonsense information and a priori segmentation (Dolnicar, 2004), this study is going further, emerging as an interesting tool to explore this market. The information provided according to respondents preferences shown after completing the survey, will be important for tourism providers at the time of identifying and attracting this important market segment; which is not only willing to pay a price premium for ecotourism experiences, but also disposed to implement some greater own restrictions or efforts at the time of visiting sensitive areas, solving there, one of the major concerns of this specific field of the tourism industry (Perkins and Brown, 2012). A deeper ecotourism knowledge achieved by visitors will increase a positive perception of the value of the ecotourist site and the positive attitudes towards ecotourism (Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2015).

Following Cini et al. (2015), there is an important gap in the literature about studies whose aim is the investigation of individuals' knowledge of ecotourism, as well as attitudes and intentions about ecotourism. In this sense, my research is trying to shed light about these issues, whilst it could be considered as a pioneer by examining the mentioned topics across groups from different countries and cultures, and also by focusing on young generations. So, the information I am gathering with this kind of study should be essential for managers and operators to add sustainability to the ecotourism industry and develop appropriate products which can get enough acceptance in the market (White, 2002).

Also, despite the generally accepted preference for psychographics at the time of segmenting tourism markets, there are few tourism studies based on customers values (Johns and Gyimóthy, 2002), so, this fact is also increasing the relevance of our study.

The tourist experience is sum of individual experience, determined by psychological factors, and social interaction between individuals (Kastenholz et al., 2012; Devesa et al. 2010; in Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2016) A compound of feelings and individual cognition about the experience are the heaviest factors to determine its quality (Ross and Iso-Ahola, 1991; in Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2016). Researching tourists' opinion about past travel experiences is a right way to check customer satisfaction (Kim, 2014; in Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2016).

As one activity included in the tourism sector, the most likely industry to generate revenues through internet-based commerce; online search is the central way of obtaining information about ecotourism offers and options. Thus, success of ecotourism businesses models is a result of a well-designed promotional strategy (Donohoe & Needham, 2008), and to achieve it, promotion strategies should incorporate different elements depending on culture and nationalities which are being targeted. For instance, the option of writing about their own experiences to be read by others on travel companies websites and blogs would be a right strategy for French and British tourism market (Pebersen and Lee, 2013).

The socio-psychological analysis of the tourist experience is essential to the sustainability and publicity of eco-friendly ways of tourism, impacting on the success of ecotourism products and destinations. Therefore, satisfaction might encourage the return intentions and the ecotourists' will to recommend either the destination or the tourism business to relatives and friends (Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2016).

Therefore, somehow, my research is following the recommendations of previous literature about the examination of connections between knowledge of ecotourism and attitudes towards ecotourism, and environmentally responsible commitment by the perceived value of an ecotourist site and ecotourist satisfaction (Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2016). Besides is shedding light to evidence-based decisions in a developing country context; until now, research on domestic ecotourists in developing countries was especially rare (Hawkins, 2004; in Moghimfar et al., 2014). At the same time, this study is testing opinions of some tourists who usually travel independently, and can be included

within the ecotourists group; following there Wurzinger and Johansson (2006) suggestion for future studies; given that, previous literature had focused mainly on those who joined organized tours.

3.2 Questionnaire development

The questionnaire was built over the roots of previous research on ecotourism and sustainable tourism, paying attention to previous ecotourism's definitions and statements. It starts with a categorical closed-ended question with a dichotomous response format (yes/no), "Have you ever travelled before for leisure?", which determines if you are guided to the second part of the questionnaire, namely, "About your past traveling for leisure experiences" (in case of affirmative answer); or to the fourth part of the survey, the one known as "About the Ecotourism concept" (if the respondent takes "No" as the preferred option). In this first section, it is timely to highlight the inclusion of question 4, because it is trying to predict respondents' closeness to ecotourism behaviour; by following, in some sense, Juric et al. (2002) proposition about an Ecotourism Interest Scale creation, which might be a convenient explanation of participation in ecotourism activities.

The mentioned second part of the questionnaire, "About your past travelling experiences" includes five ordinal closed-ended questions combined with multiple default response options to be evaluated by their respective frequency scale and, in the end, another categorical closed-ended question, which is working again as a filter, "Have you ever visited, as a tourist, an ecotourism destination?" So, in case the response would be "No" or "No, but I intend to try one soon", the respondent is going to the fourth part of the questionnaire. Meanwhile, in case of affirmative answer, she/he would be leaded to the third part of the questionnaire. This second part is oriented to determine respondents' traveling frequency, but, especially, their preferences (not necessarily limited to ecotourism products) at the time of choosing either their destinations or accommodations, by knowing their behaviour as tourists, given that this is the best way of predicting tourism priorities. Obviously we are only able to do it in a posteriori study like ours makes, with the intention of adapting businesses to future visitors (Johns and Gyimóthy, 2002). At the same time, we are acquiring an incipient idea about their ecological habits when traveling, and ecotourism interest by knowing which their favourite destinations are.

The third part, known as “About your past ecotourism experiences”, is a set of five questions. The first one is an ordinal closed-ended question, “How often do you take an ecotourism holiday?”, with a seven options frequency scale for response. Afterwards, there are three open questions to find out which are the preferred destinations for an ecotourism holidays, the size of the group you are traveling with and the trip duration. In between one ordinal closed-ended question, with multiple default response options and frequency scale is included. Finally, there is a categorical closed-ended question with a dichotomous response format (yes/no) to explore if the respondent has the intention of taking any kind of ecotourism holidays in the next couple of years. This section has got some inspiration on Cini et al. (2015) research, because they examined participants' past ecotourism experiences in their study.

The fourth part, “About the Ecotourism concept”, has a total of four questions. Two of them (second and fourth) are open, with the purpose of determining both the perception the respondent has about what ecotourism means and why she/he would be willing to pay more for an ecotourism product instead of a conventional one. In this case, no ecotourism definition was provided, because individuals usually have different images of ecotourism, and the fact of giving previously a definition could predispose them to direct their responses consequently (White, 2002). The first and the third question of this part are both categorical closed-ended questions to know, on the one hand, where the information about ecotourism was achieved, and, on the other hand, if they are willing (and how much) to pay more for an ecotourism package. Previously, Kazeminia et al. (2016) stated that exploring willingness to pay a premium price for sustainable services will provide ecotourism marketers with clear advantages by simplifying tasks oriented to develop promotion campaigns. Also, Lu et al. (2014) had studied willingness to pay a premium for ecotourism, but as they suggested, further research would be required to acquire a more accurate picture of the topic.

The fifth part, “About Ecotourism”, contains one ordinal closed-ended question to determine how respondents consider the experience of visiting an ecotourism destination. 15 items are presented as response choices, combining both negative and positive perceptions (seven are negative and eight positive), which will be evaluated by a 5-point Likert-type scale. This section has been elaborated having into account previous research conducted by Lu et al. (2014) about Ecotourism attitude. Given that risk perception is an

interesting factor for segmenting tourism markets (Johns and Gyimóthy, 2002), this element was included in one of these 15 items.

The sixth part, “Information on your preferences and ideas on traveling”, is also one closed-ended question with 9 items, which are rated by another 5-point Likert-type scale. The purpose of this section is getting an idea about travellers' preferences and ideas. I designed a combination of the 15 items exposed by Dunlap et al. (2000) in “The New Ecological Paradigm” with others proposed by Perkins and Brown (2012) in “Relationships between Environmental Value Orientation and Tourist' Attitudes”. A selection was made taking into account both references, in order to get the most remarkable issues for my study, trying to avoid a too long question, which could lead to apathy. The New Ecological Paradigm is one of the most recognized conceptualizations when assessing environmental beliefs, because it quantifies perceptions about biosphere and consequences of human activity on it (Kazeminia et al., 2016).

Finally, the last part, “About you”, is a set of 14 questions to acquire socio-demographic information about respondents, including one closed-ended question with seven response items and a 5-point Likert-type scale oriented to determine their perception and habits about environmental issues. Variables included in this section such as country of origin, age and activity participation (in a softer way) are important to cluster our sample of respondents (Johns and Gyimóthy, 2002). This part has been placed at the end of the survey, because I consider is the fastest to be responded, and, thus, with this location my intention is that respondents are motivated and brisk enough when answering previous parts, which demand for deeper concentration.

Respondents' income is also rated in this section, given that segmenting potential tourists according to this variable allows marketers to establish better development trends and design new and diversified products, which are oriented to suit tourists' wants (Tkacysnski et al., 2015).

Traditionally, demographic and socioeconomic characteristics have been considered as two of the most important elements of segmentation. On the contrary, Johns and Gyimóthy (2002) question the accuracy of age, gender and wealth by themselves to predict purchasing behaviour, given that they are only indirectly related to buying

intentions. To solve this limitation, we are combining the above variables with psychometric measures of attitudes and values analysed in other parts of the survey.

3.3 Sampling strategy

The sample selected for this study has been selected under the purpose of analysing personal ecotourism experiences, preferences and knowledge about the topic through an exploratory research, which is quantitative in nature. Firstly, it is oriented towards the analysis of the variables already mentioned among the student community from different parts of Europe; so, in this sense, is giving us a multicultural and international perspective that allows to overcome past limitations in some of the ecotourism research which only had focused on one specific country, once, we know that different cultural values may affect tourists' biospheric values, environmental attitudes, and environmental behaviour (Lee and Jan, 2015). Latterly, the study is establishing an interesting comparison about ecotourism attitudes and preferences in terms of age between the commented student population and a middle age local sample; in this case belonging to two Galician towns, in the northwest of Spain. In the same way the questionnaire is including cultural, economic and social issues; besides, obviously, environmental aspects, with the purpose of involving every spectrum of human life at destinations (Moghimehfar et al., 2014). Also, my sample is containing an important percentage of respondents from countries with Eastern cultural heritage, like Pebersen and Lee (2013) had suggested as the right next step on the research about motivations for visiting nature-based destinations, and, consequently, ecotourists ones as the most highlighted among them.

One of the reasons why this sampling strategy was chosen is because during last decades, youth and student travellers between 15 and 30 years have become a key part of the international tourism market, growing faster than any other travel segment. It is predicted that by 2020, student traveller market will involve 300 million arrivals worldwide, representing a value market of 320 billion dollars. It is also important highlighting the social and environmental implications of young travellers, playing an important role in the support of sustainable tourism (Cini et al., 2015).

But, as important as what is mentioned above, or maybe even more, is the fact that “The youth of today can become the ecotourists of tomorrow” (Cini et al., 2015, p. 75);

so, analysing this segment of travellers will be a smart idea at the time of defining future marketing strategies either for ecotourism and or mass tourism industry in next years.

Related to the questionnaire itself, and following Podsakoff et al. (2012) (in Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2016), it was designed having into account two important issues: 1) maximization of respondent motivation and ability, and 2) encouraging accurate responses by minimizing task difficulty. These ideas were tried to be developed by using a pithy and clear language, avoiding the introduction of rare and vague concepts. At the same time, participation was intended to be fostered by: 1) guarantee of anonymity; 2) no inducement to what could be considered as the right answer; 3) briefness of the questionnaire (Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2012).

Socio-demographic and psychographic variables are also analysed in the questionnaire, in order to gain a better understanding of participants' profile; avoiding limitations mentioned in previous research (Cini et al., 2015).

Given that previous literature has not found interaction between higher level of education and deeper knowledge of ecotourism; mainly because formal education curriculum usually do not promotes pro-environmental knowledge, awareness and practice (Moghimehfar et al., 2014), one of the commitments of this study is having into account this issue, which has been considered and detailed in the demographic characteristics description. Thus, my research is trying to examine the effect of individuals' attitude towards environmental protection as an intervening variable which alters the association between knowledge of ecotourism and ecotourists' behaviour, following Moghimehfar et al. (2014) recommendations.

3.4 Data collection and study site

Two study sites were selected to execute this study, obtaining a total of 195 valid responses. On the one hand, questionnaires were distributed to the student community by e-mail (which will be defined for study purposes as *Site A*), by previous contact with their professors and departments responsible from different European Universities. Also, the system “e-mail dinâmico” available on the Sigarra website, from Faculty of Economics of Universidade do Porto, was the other tool to get questionnaire responses, either among

Portuguese students or the Erasmus community registered in this Faculty. Obviously, both mechanisms have respected the mandatory privacy of interview people. On the whole, 160 people completed the survey in this site; but only 148 were considered valid, after eliminating 12 respondents above 40 years old, in order to have a more homogeneous sample which shows a clearer contrast with *Site B*.

On the other hand, according to the delivery of the questionnaire among the middle-age people selected to establish the comparison with the mentioned student community, two study sites were chosen, both located in Galicia (Spain), and gathering a total number of 47 respondents (defined both for this study as *Site B*). One was Serra de Outes Health Care Center, in the province of A Coruña; where the surveys were distributed in paper format, among the medical community and management service of this clinic. The other site chosen was Pérez Viondi Primary School, in my hometown, A Estrada, in the province of Pontevedra. In this case, surveys were sent by e-mail among teachers and management staff who work in this center, after getting the kind collaboration from the school's principal and management responsible.

Both places, either Serra de Outes Health Care Center or Pérez Viondi Primary School, were selected due to they are public ownership, so, their staff are civil servants. This fact is important because my intention is analysing a middle-age population with relatively high income and employment stability, which is usually identified as the most prone segment to consume ecotourism products. "The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) (2006) on global ecotourism trends found that ecotourists are mainly middle-age to elderly" (Cini et al, 2015, p. 75). Also, as it was stated previously in section 2.2 of the literature review part (*Ecotourists' characteristics*), ecotourists are described as the ones who have a relatively high income. This kind of wages is not easy to be found in the private sector in this region, because of the high rate of unemployment and the incidence of economic crisis, factors which characterized the current Galician economic structure. At the same time, Galicia was chosen because it represents a very traditional society, and I find particularly interesting its comparison with the student community, which theoretically is associated with vanguard, modernity, and it includes very different standards of behaviour.

4 Results

4.1 Sample characterization

With reference to the demographic characteristics of the sample of university students (see Table 2), they are mainly female (61.5 %), and age average of 24.59 years old. The most represented countries are Portugal with 30.32 % of the sample and a frequency of 50 people, and Slovenia with 28.38 % and a frequency of 42 people. 66.22 % of respondents are single, 28.37 % are living with a partner, and 5.41 % married. Also, 93.24 % do not belong to any environmental association, 41.89 % practice water sports, trekking or hiking, and 35.81 % enjoy bird or wildlife watching/photographing as a hobby. In this case, 83.11 % of this population live most of their time in an urban area. 85.14 % are currently students, although among the other 14.86 %, most of them are linked to the University, either working there (professors, university staff,...) or they have finished recently their university studies. Among them 33.78 % are currently or recently were a mobility (International) student. On the whole, only 17.57 % have finished their Master's Degree (plus 1 respondent who has also a PhD Degree); obviously because the vast majority are still registered in their respective faculties. Their main field of studies are Economics and Management (65.54 %), but having a varied representation from the other degrees. Solely 20.95 % of respondents are full time employed, whilst 64.19 % are not employed at all; with the 34.46 % having less than 200 euros as individual monthly income, 14.19 % between 1000 and 2000 euros, and none of them is having a monthly income of 2000 euros. Also, a 5-point Likert-type scale was included in this section of the survey, in order to determine perceptions and habits about environmental issues. The statement "I am an ecotourist" obtained an overall Likert scale average of 2.29, quite similar to "I boycott companies with unecological or unethical background" which got an average of 2.53. Meanwhile, the assertions "I contribute financially to environmental organizations" and "I ride a bicycle or take public transportation to work or school" have been catalogued with overall Likert scale average of 1.82 and 3.42, respectively. The one which showed a stronger environmental commitment would be "I turn down heat, lights and devices when I leave any room for long periods of time" with a 4.21 of average, although this statement also has a positive impact on personal budget, not only an

ecocentric perspective; which is not clear either after the analysis of the assertions “I talk with friends about problems related to the environment” and “I read about environmental issues” which reflect an overall average of 3.17 and 3.16, respectively.

On the whole, the sample of respondents gathered in Serra de Outes and A Estrada (Galicia, Spain) are predominantly female (61.7 %), with Spanish nationality (all of them) and age average of 48.82 years old. 38,3 % of respondents are married, 21.3 % living with a partner and 23,4 % single (see also Table 2). The vast majority of them do not belong to any environmental organization (95.7 %), the 44.7 % practice water sports, trekking or hiking and only the 31.9 % enjoy bird or wildlife watching or photographing as a hobby. Also, the 95.7 % of respondents are not considering themselves as students, and none of them is/was recently a mobility (Erasmus/Séneca) student. These characteristics are important in order to get an homogeneous and opposed sample to the one represented by the student community, and thus establishing an interesting comparison. Most of these Galician people have completed a Master's Degree (85.1 %), are employed full time (72.3 %) with a relatively high income, having into account characteristics of the region where the study site is based on (47.6 % between 1000 and 2000 euros, and 28.6 % between 2000 and 3000 euros). There are only 5 people not employed, but only two of these expressed they have less than 200 euros as monthly income. Apparently the demographic characteristics of this group would be, according the literature previously examined, the most favourable to show empathy with ecotourism. Also, the majority of them do not have an environmental or tourism-related job (89.4 %). The considerable percentage of this sample which lives in a rural area (48.9 %) might palliate their intention of choosing an ecotourism package, if we follow the above-mentioned Tkazynski et al. (2015) statement which says that doing different activities from our usual lifestyle is one of the most essential elements at the time of choosing potential holidays destinations. Ignorance could be considered as other unmotivated element, but, in the third part of the survey, only the 19.1 % of respondents admits they have not heard/read about ecotourism before. Regarding to the 5-point Likert-type scale built to track respondents' environmental perceptions and habits, 7 assertions were defined, getting these overall scale averages: “I am an ecotourist” 2.51, “I contribute financially to environmental organizations”, 1.94, “I read about environmental issues” 3.45, “I talk with friends about problems related to the environment” 3.98, “I boycott companies with unecological or unethical background”

2.36, “I turn down heat, lights and devices when I leave any room for long periods of time” 4.66, and “I ride a bicycle or take public transportation to work or school” 2.85.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the sample

<i>Variable description</i>	<i>Site A</i>		<i>Site B</i>	
	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage of respondents</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage of respondents</i>
<i>Age of respondents (years)</i>				
<30	130	87.84 %	0	0%
30-39	18	12.16 %	14	29.79 %
40-49	0	0 %	7	14.89 %
50-59	0	0 %	13	27.66 %
>59	0	0 %	13	27.66 %
<i>Gender</i>				
Females	91	61.5 %	29	61.7 %
Males	57	38.5 %	18	38.3 %
<i>Education</i>				
No formal education	0	0%	0	0 %
Secondary school	13	8.79 %	6	12.77 %
Undergraduate (but registered as university student)	108	72.97 %	0	0 %
University degree (graduated) or higher	27	18.24 %	41	87.23 %
<i>Membership in environmental association</i>				
Nonmember	138	93.24 %	45	95.7 %
Member	10	6.76 %	2	4.3 %
<i>Marital status</i>				
Single	98	66.22 %	11	23.4 %
Married	8	5.41 %	18	38.3 %
Living with a partner	42	28.37 %	10	21.3 %
<i>Employment status</i>				
Full time employed	31	20.95 %	34	72.3 %
Not employed	95	64.19 %	5	2.35 %
<i>Individual monthly income</i>				
Less than 200 euros	51	34.46 %	2	4.3 %
1001-2000 euros	21	14.19 %	22	47.6 %
Over 2000 euros	0	0	13	28.6 %

4.2 Past travelling for leisure experiences

In this first section of the questionnaire, and related to the questionnaires distributed among the student community (*Site A*), 93.5 % have travelled before for leisure, only 14.19 % have visited an ecotourism destination before, and 6.08% travel “often” and 2.03 “always” in organized excursions. With regard to travel destination preferences, I am trying to figure out which are their levels of ecotourism interest; so, “sports/hiking/trekking in preserved nature” is the most demanded activity, with 10.81 % of the sample doing it “twice a year”, 15.54 % “once a year”, and 14.19 % “once every 2 or 3 years”. 34.46 % of the population “sometimes”, 16.22 % “frequently” and 2.70 % “always” prefers a tourism product or service with green accreditation over one which does not have; whilst, 30.41 % “frequently” and 12.16 % “always” try to minimize their consumption of water and energy. Regarding to the habit of reducing and recycling waste, 23.65 % of respondents admits they “always” do it and 29.05 % “frequently”.

With regard to the Galician population analysed in Serra de Outes Health Care Center and Pérez Viondi Primary School (*Site B*), 95.7 % have travelled before for leisure, but only the 31.1 % have visited before an ecotourism destination, and the 6.7 % admits travelling frequently (“often”) in organized excursions. According to their destinations preferences, “food and wine experiences” is the most demanded, with the 24.4 % choosing it “once every 2 or 3 years” and 13.3 % “twice a year”. Juric et al. (2002) consider this activity as a “nonecotourism” one, although it could have a certain ecotourism influence, in terms of either supporting the development of local economy or preserving traditions and culture, by acquiring knowledge about local gastronomic habits or in case the location would have a close relationship with a traditional wine industry. Anyway, this option (given that it does not have any reference in the survey which might link it with local tradition or development), was introduced in a similar manner Juric et al. (2002) propose, namely, as the choice which is further from ecotourism behaviour. Significantly, 46.7 % “never” have done “sports/hiking or trekking” in preserved nature. 28.9 % “sometimes” and 26.7 % “frequently” chooses tourism products with eco-certification instead of ones that do not have; and the vast majority of them shows a commitment with environmental conservation when they are travelling, given that 44.4% “frequently” and 35.6 % “always” try to minimize the consumption of water and energy. In this sense, 33.3 % “frequently” and 40.0 % “always” reduce and recycle waste as tourists.

4.3 Past ecotourism experiences

Only the respondents who admitted to take an ecotourism experience before were redirected to this section. Among the sample of students, 95.24 % of them want to take again an ecotourism holiday in the next couple of years. Private local village accommodation/ chalets or cottages are the most commonly type of accommodation used, with the 33.3 % of respondents “often” selecting this alternative. Their travelling group size average is 3.62 people, and the duration average of those ecotourism trips is 5.48 days. According to how often they take an ecotourism holiday, most of them (38.1 %) do “once every 2 or 3 years”, and 28.6 % “once a year”. Although there is a significant diversity among where respondents usually go for their ecotourism holidays, the most frequent answer is national or nature parks.

With regard to the Site B, it is significant that 85.7 % are willing to repeat an ecotourism experience in the near future. Hotels are, so far, the favourite type of accommodation for this group, with the 21.4 % of them “always” choosing this option. With reference to how often they take an ecotourism holiday, 14.3 % do “once every 2 or 3 years”, and 21.4 % “once a year”. Size average of these travelling groups is 4.6 components, and duration average 5.6 days. The most repeated response, regarding to where they usually enjoy their ecotourism experiences and also considering the important variety among them, is nature parks.

4.4 The ecotourism concept

Most of respondents from the student community analysed (29.73 %) acquire their ideas about ecotourism from the media (tv, radio, movies, internet, newspapers/magazines, books); 23.65 % from friends, colleagues or family members; whilst 35.81 % recognize they have not heard/read about ecotourism before. There is a wide diversity of opinions about what ecotourism is, but most of them highlight the fact of travelling to natural areas without causing any damage to the environment, and just a few people have into account the cultural perspective of ecotourism (by mentioning the importance of respecting the local culture and heritage). None of respondents refers to the impulse ecotourism should have on the development of local economies.

A crucial issue for ecotourism marketers is the willingness to pay a premium price for an ecotourism product or destination, and one section of my study was dedicated to this theme. Among the responses gathered within European university students, 41.22 % are not willing to pay more for ecotourism, in contrast with conventional tourism, 25.0 % would accept paying until 10 % more, and 26.35 % would pay between 10 %-25 % more. Media (tv, radio, movies, internet, newspapers/magazines, books) is also the main channel for the middle-age Galician people (Site B) to acquire their ideas about ecotourism (55.3 % of respondents). However, it is also appropriate to highlight the 38,3 % of the sample who get their ideas from friends, family members or colleagues, clearly above the advertisement provided by ecotourism operators (8.5 % of respondents). Valuably, 19.1 % of these people had not heard about ecotourism before.

With reference to the opinion people have about what ecotourism means, it is important to point out that none of the respondents mention either the role play by ecotourism in the promotion of economic development for local communities or cultural issues associated with the ecotourism definition itself. Most of the answers are clearly oriented towards the commitment ecotourism has with environmental conservation, understanding it as a way of travelling which does not harm the environment. Similarly, in the previous study made by Cobbinah (2015), he also only found through his interviews references to two of the five key principles of ecotourism he proposes, specifically environmental conservation and economic benefits.

Regarding to the opinions gathered in Serra de Outes Health Care Center and Pérez Viondi Primary School, 44.7 % of respondents are not willing to pay more for ecotourism as opposed to conventional tourism, 29.8 % are willing to pay until a 10 % more, and 19.1 % are willing to pay between 10 % - 25 % more for ecotourism.

4.5 Ecotourism

15 items are presented to test respondents' opinion about how they would catalogue an ecotourism experience, combining both negative and positive perceptions (seven are negative and eight positive). On the whole, statements with a positive connotation on ecotourism are getting the highest overall Likert scale averages in Site A ("is enjoyable" 3.76, "is a positive experience" 4.00, "is a self-improvement experience"

3.82, “is exciting” 3.51, “gives the possibility to experience silence and rest” 3.76, “increases your self-confidence through challenging activities” 3.41, “is a holiday in the wilderness” 3.04, “gives the possibility to get in touch with the beauty of the nature” 4.16). In contrast, items that show a negative perception about ecotourism obtained lower Likert scale averages (“can destroy/damage a fragile natural environment” 1.97, “implies tiring activities” 2.70, “is boring” 1.91, “implies renouncing comforts and services” 2.81, “is a risky/dangerous experience” 2.27, “means mainly loneliness” 1.91, and “implies bans and limitations on the enjoyment of the surrounding natural environment” 2.42), which clearly reflects disagreement with these assertions. It might be timely to remember that a grade of 1 corresponds to “strongly disagree”, whilst 5 means “strongly agree”.

Meanwhile, among people who responded the survey either in Serra de Outes Health Care Center or in Pérez Viondi Primary School, I got the following overall Likert scale averages. With regard to statements with a positive connotation about ecotourism: “is enjoyable” 4.36, “is a positive experience” 4.02, “is a self-improvement experience” 3.64, “is exciting” 3.81, “is a holiday in the wilderness” 3.04, “gives the possibility to experience silence and rest” 3.81, “increases your self-confidence through challenging activities” 3.04, and “gives the possibility to get in touch with the beauty of the nature” 4.30.

On the contrary, no favourable assertions are rated in the following manner: “is boring” 1.68, “implies tiring activities” 2.47, “is a risky/dangerous experience” 1.87, “implies renouncing comforts and services” 2.64, “means mainly loneliness” 2.19, “can destroy/damage a fragile natural environment” 2.23, and “implies bans and limitations on the enjoyment of the surrounding natural environment” 2.40.

4.6 Preferences and ideas on travelling

The purpose of this section is getting an idea about travellers' preferences and ideas. There is a combination of the 15 items which were chosen with the intention of determining respondents' values towards either a “biocentric” or “anthropocentric” perspective. Following Galley & Clifton (2003), a biocentric/ecocentric point of view

would be that one which defends practice of minimal intervention on the biosphere; conceding high values to natural resources, by making a responsible or very limited use of them. On the other hand, an anthropocentric philosophy argues for putting human values at the core, having the right to shape the nature for their own sake.

Thus, anthropocentric favourable assertions within the sample of students community achieve the following overall Likert scale average: “I am entitled to travel anywhere and anyhow I choose since I pay for the personal experience” 3.25, “I am entitled to use as much water/power/resources during my visit as I think fit for my own enjoyment” 2.30, “Humans have the right to modify the natural environment to suit their needs” 2.08, “the balance of nature is strong enough to cope with the impacts of modern industrial nations” 2.05, and “while staying in a hotel, I would have the towels changed daily” 2.39.

On the contrary environmental awareness is represented on the biocentric oriented statements as follows: “I support that some national parks and wilderness areas are closed to the public, to protect the environment” 3.93, “I should definitely consider my impact on the earth and other cultures when I make my travel choices” 3.80, “when humans interfere with nature, it often has disastrous consequences” 3.64, and “after a picnic, one must the place as clean as it was originally” 4.63.

Likewise, the sample of Galician people provides the following grades. Regarding to pro-anthropocentric assertions: “I am entitled to travel anywhere and anyhow I choose since I pay for the personal experience” 2.55, “I am entitled to use as much water/power/resources during my visit as I think fit for my own enjoyment” 1.74, “humans have the right to modify the natural environment to suit their needs” 1.77, “the balance of nature is strong enough to cope with the impacts of modern industrial nations” 1.47, and “while staying in a hotel, I would have the towels changed daily” 1.70.

With regard to sentences which manifest a certain environmental commitment: “I support that some national parks and wilderness areas are closed to the public, to protect the environment” 4.47, “I should definitely consider my impact on the earth and other cultures when I make my travel choices” 4.13, “when humans interfere with nature, it often has disastrous consequences” 4.36, and “after a picnic, one must the place as clean as it was originally” 4.98.

5 Discussion

After analysing *past travelling for leisure experiences* of both samples, we can observe that more people from the higher age interval than the student community sample declared they had enjoyed a past ecotourism. This fact might agree with the traditional ecotourists' standard profile that previous literature had established (a middle-age person). In this sense, it is important to have into account that no ecotourism definition a priori is given to respondents, because I am trying to guess their knowledge about the topic. However, descriptive statistics from question 4, designed to determine the levels of ecotourism interest by measuring the frequency of visit to certain touristic destinations, showed that respondents from Site A visit more frequently those kinds of destinations which can be identified as a possible example of ecotourism (See Table 3). On the other hand, by analysing their ecological habits when travelling: waste recycling, water and energy consumption, and attitudes towards non-ecological packaging materials; I found that the older group has a stronger environmental commitment, so, consequently, the increasing environmental sensitivity and awareness stated by previous literature, and mentioned in the first part of this study, is more visible in Site B.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of visits to certain touristic destinations

		Site A (n=148)			Site B (n=47)		
		Frequency (%)					
		Twice a year	Once a year	Once every 2-3 years	Twice a year	Once a year	Once every 2-3 years
Touristic destinations							
Ecotourism activities	Bird or wildlife watching/photographing	2.03	8.78	9.46	6.7	0	8.9
	Ecolodge experiences	4.05	6.76	4.05	0	6.7	6.7
	Sports/hiking/trekking in preserved nature	10.81	15.54	14.19	4.4	11.1	6.7
	Wild camping	2.70	11.49	10.81	2.2	0	4.4
Nonecotourism activities	Food and wine experiences (e.g. in vineyards)	4.73	10.14	12.84	13.3	6.7	24.4

Regarding to *past ecotourism experiences*, there is a similarity in terms of the duration of their ecotourism trips (5.48 and 5.6), and group size (6.62 and 4.6), and it is clear in both groups the will of repeating an ecotourism experience, in case they have had any in the past, related with the previously mentioned Kazeminia et al. (2016) statement

that when feelings anticipated from certain experience are pleasant, people usually take some benign attitudes towards that activity. It is timely to say that due to the limited percentage of people who admitted to have had a past ecotourism experience, it is hard to establish clear conclusions in this section of the survey.

In section 3 of the questionnaire, *About the ecotourism concept*, the findings indicate a slightly higher percentage of respondents from Site B (44.7 %), in comparison with Site A (41.22 %), are not willing to pay a premium price for ecotourism. 29.4 % from Site B, versus 25.0 % from Site A would be willing to pay until 10 % more for ecotourism. A percentage of 19.1 % from Site B, and 26.35 % from Site A would be willing to pay between 10-25 % more for ecotourism. So, surprisingly, although demographic characteristics from Site B would be, theoretically, more likely to make an economic effort to purchase an ecotourism product, descriptive statistics from this section do not corroborate this relationship. Arguments exposed for those who are willing to pay extra money for ecotourism are diverse. So, among the student community sample (Site A), some of them said that they would pay more because it is a superior, more relaxing or unique experience, others refers to the fact makes sense that sustainable tourism would be more expensive. However, some respondents only would pay more for ecotourism after comparing every specific case (what is every product or destination offering), I mean they would not be willing to pay more just for the mere fact they are buying a green product. On the contrary, those who are not willing to pay a premium price for ecotourism justify mostly their behaviour because of personal budget constraints. With regard to the Galician sample (Site B), reasons argued for those who want to pay an extra for ecotourism are diverse, but among them we can mention as the most repeated: the singularity that an ecotourism experience might offer you in contrast with the conventional or mass tourism, and because of the positive impact that ecotourism has on the environmental conservation.

The fact that the media is the most important channel where respondents from both samples acquired their ideas about ecotourism from (29.73 % of Site A, and 55.3 % of Site B) highlights the importance of the selection and implementation of improving the image and truthfulness of ecotourism, avowing the emergence of the mentioned phenomenon of *greenwashing*. This is why, given that the mentioned high percentage of middle-age people (Site B) who might be influenced by media, developing a long-term and sustainable strategy to improve the image of ecotourism as an industry on these media

channels (tv, radio, movies, internet, newspapers/magazines, books) might be essential for those companies and destinations which actually comply the tenets of ecotourism to gain competitive advantage. It is important to have into account that only 8.5 % of respondents from Site B acquire their knowledge about ecotourism directly from advertisement provided by ecotourism operators. However, 23.65 % of Site A, and 38.3 % of Site B got their ideas from friends, family members or colleagues, fact that strengthens the relevance of word-of-mouth communication channel and the need of focusing on customer satisfaction, which were also referred in the literature review section of this study. Valuably, 19.1 % of respondents from Site B and 35.1 % from Site A had not heard about ecotourism before. In the case of the students sample (Site A), this is in line with the statement “the few empirical evidences on the topic found that the youth to have a moderate level of knowledge about ecotourism, although with positive attitudes towards it” (Sangpikul & Batra, 2007 in Cini et al., 2015, p 75).

With reference to the comparison between Site A and Site B concerning their *perceptions about visiting an ecotourism destination* (section 4 of the questionnaire: *About ecotourism*), through the 15 statements measured by the Likert scale; we can say that respondents from Site B (Serra de Outes Health Care Center and Pérez Viondi Primary School) showed a higher *ecotourism attitude*, namely, they have, slightly, better opinion about what visiting an ecotourism destination represents. This is justified by mean ratings calculation after obtaining overall Likert scale average (see Table 4, in the next page).

Similarly there is a bigger difference between both sites with regard to their *preferences and ideas on travelling*. It is clear that the usual segment of people more likely to consume ecotourism, according to previous literature examined, and in this case represented by Site B (people above 40 years old, well-educated and with relatively high income), is achieving a stronger *environmental belief* after analysing their preferences and ideas on travelling, by mean ratings calculation from these Likert scale scores (see Table 5, in the next page).

Table 4. Perceptions about visiting an ecotourism destination

<i>Perceptions about visiting an ecotourism destination (factor: ecotourism attitude)</i>	<i>Site A (n=148)</i>	<i>Site B (n=47)</i>
<i>Positive perception about ecotourism</i>		
Ecotourism is enjoyable	3.76	4.36
Ecotourism is a positive experience	4.00	4.02
Ecotourism is a self-improvement experience	3.82	3.64
Ecotourism is exciting	3.51	3.81
Ecotourism is a holiday in the wilderness	3.04	3.04
Ecotourism gives the possibility to experience silence and rest	3.76	3.81
Ecotourism increases your self-confidence through challenging activities	3.41	3.04
Ecotourism gives the possibility to get in touch with the beauty of the nature	4.16	4.30
<i>Negative perception about ecotourism</i>		
Ecotourism is boring	1.91	1.68
Ecotourism implies tiring activities	2.70	2.47
Ecotourism is a risky/dangerous experience	2.27	1.87
Ecotourism implies renouncing comforts and services	2.82	2.64
Ecotourism means mainly loneliness	1.91	2.19
Ecotourism can destroy/ damage a fragile natural environment	1.97	2.23
Ecotourism implies bans and limitations on the enjoyment of the surrounding natural environment	2.42	2.40
<i>Positive perception about ecotourism mean</i>	3.68 (s=0.33*)	3.75 (s=0.48*)
<i>Negative perception about ecotourism mean</i>	2.29 (s=0.35*)	2.21 (s=0.31*)

**s=standard deviation*

Table 5. Preferences and ideas on travelling

<i>Preferences and ideas on travelling (factor: environmental beliefs)</i>	<i>Site A (n=148)</i>	<i>Site B (n=47)</i>
<i>Pro-anthropocentric assertions</i>		
I am entitled to travel anywhere and anyhow I choose since I pay for the personal experience	3.25	2.55
I am entitled to use as much water/power/resources during my visit as I think fit for my own enjoyment	2.30	1.74
The balance of nature is strong enough to cope with the impacts of modern industrial nations	2.05	1.47
While staying in a hotel, I would have the towels changed daily	2.39	1.70
Humans have the right to modify the natural environment to suit their needs	2.08	1.77
<i>Pro-ecocentric assertions</i>		
I should definitely consider my impact on the earth and other cultures when I make my travel choices	3.80	4.13

When humans interfere with nature, it often has disastrous consequences	3.64	4.36
After a picnic, one must leave the place as clean as it was originally	4.63	4.98
I support that some national parks and wilderness areas are closed to the public, to protect the environment	3.93	4.47
<i>Environmental belief mean (pro-anthropocentric orientation)</i>	2.41 (s=0.44*)	1.85 (s=0.02*)
<i>Environmental belief mean (pro-ecocentric orientation)</i>	4.00 (s=0.38*)	4.49 (s=0.009*)

***s=standard deviation**

Section 6 (*About you*) was used to determine demographic characteristics of both samples (which were detailed in the last point of chapter 4 of this study, and represented in Table 1), and the perceptions and habits about environmental issues. With regard to this last matter, respondents from Site B showed a higher pro- environmental sensitivity, given that their perceptions and habits have a stronger commitment with environmental issues, although there is no important difference between both samples (See Table 6).

Table 6. Perceptions and habits about environmental issues

<i>Perceptions and habits about environmental issues (factor: pro-environmental sensitivity)</i>	<i>Site A (n=148)</i>	<i>Site B (n=47)</i>
I am an ecotourist	2.29	2.51
I contribute financially to environmental organizations	1.82	1.94
I read about environmental issues	3.16	3.45
I talk with friends about problems related to the environment	3.17	3.98
I boycott companies with unecological or unethical background	2.53	2.36
I turn down heat, lights and devices when I leave any room for long periods of time.	4.21	4.66
I ride a bicycle or take public transportation to work or school	3.42	2.85
<i>Pro-environmental sensitivity mean</i>	2.94 (s=0.60*)	3.11(s=0.89*)

***s=standard deviation**

6 Conclusions

As it was introduced in the beginning of this study, there is a rich diversity of opinions about what ecotourism represents. This fact is quite clear through the variety of ecotourism definitions the literature has developed since the emergence of this term. In this sense, designing a new ecotourism definition is not the purpose of my research; however, I would like to mention, briefly, which are, in my opinion, the targets ecotourism should pursue in order to be materialized as a sustainable and viable alternative in the tourism industry. It is timely to refer to Cobbinah (2015) again, because he had categorized the principles of ecotourism in five groups, as follows: environmental conservation, cultural preservation, community participation, economic benefits and empowerment of vulnerable groups. In my case, I consider the advisability of establishing five main goals for ecotourism, as a result of the examination of the huge previous literature about the theme; including, obviously, the mentioned Cobbinah contribution, but also my personal perceptions after analysing the primary data collected on my questionnaires. So, personally, I think ecotourism should be oriented towards:

1-Environmental conservation: clearly this is one of the ecotourism's identity marks, and reason that explains the emergence of this activity, which is strongly linked to the increase of environmental awareness and sensitivity. At the same time, as it was mentioned above, ecotourism has emerged as the right method to minimize the harmful effects of travelling on nature.

2-Cultural conservation and interaction with local people: although surveys' analysis showed that people do not associate ecotourism with learning about the culture of their holidays' destinations, most of literature definitions, recognizes ecotourism commitment with the preservation of local culture. In my opinion, with the intention of increasing ecotourism attractiveness, marketers should upgrade the interaction with local communities, as a way to energize this perspective, given acquiring knowledge about local customs might represent an interesting method to obtain competitive advantage either for a product or a specific destination. Conservation of traditional tasks is one of the main assets to promote ecotourism in one specific area. My study shows, through the primary data collected, that potential ecotourism customers are not especially aware of the cultural

component of ecotourism, so, in order to gain efficiency, it should be promoted more intensively by ecotourism marketers.

3-Economic benefits: despite the fact ecotourism activity is full of values and feelings, we cannot forget that it is being marketized by different companies, either at a local or global scope, which are pursuing their profits maximization.

4-Introduction of ethical components when travelling: As it was referred by World Tourism Organization (WTO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in its definition, ecotourism implies ethical issues. This issue converges directly with the role education should play in ecotourism. Potential customers should be educated in order to distinguish between what, actually, ecotourism represents and what it cannot be considered ecotourism under no circumstance. In this field, certifications should be efficient enough to assure its own truthfulness and, there, guarantee the sustainability of the industry.

5-Development of local economy: interaction with locals is fostering ecotourism attractiveness and, also, tourists usually value, in a very positive way, the fact of having either local guides or any kind of local products to buy.

To sum up, in my opinion, the challenge for ecotourism companies or destinations is to highlight that/those element/-s from this list which matches better with the segment/-s of customers they are trying to target. Obviously the third one is not the most interesting to be made visible in front of the eyes of the customer, but it should be taken into account at the time of developing the marketing strategy.

7 References

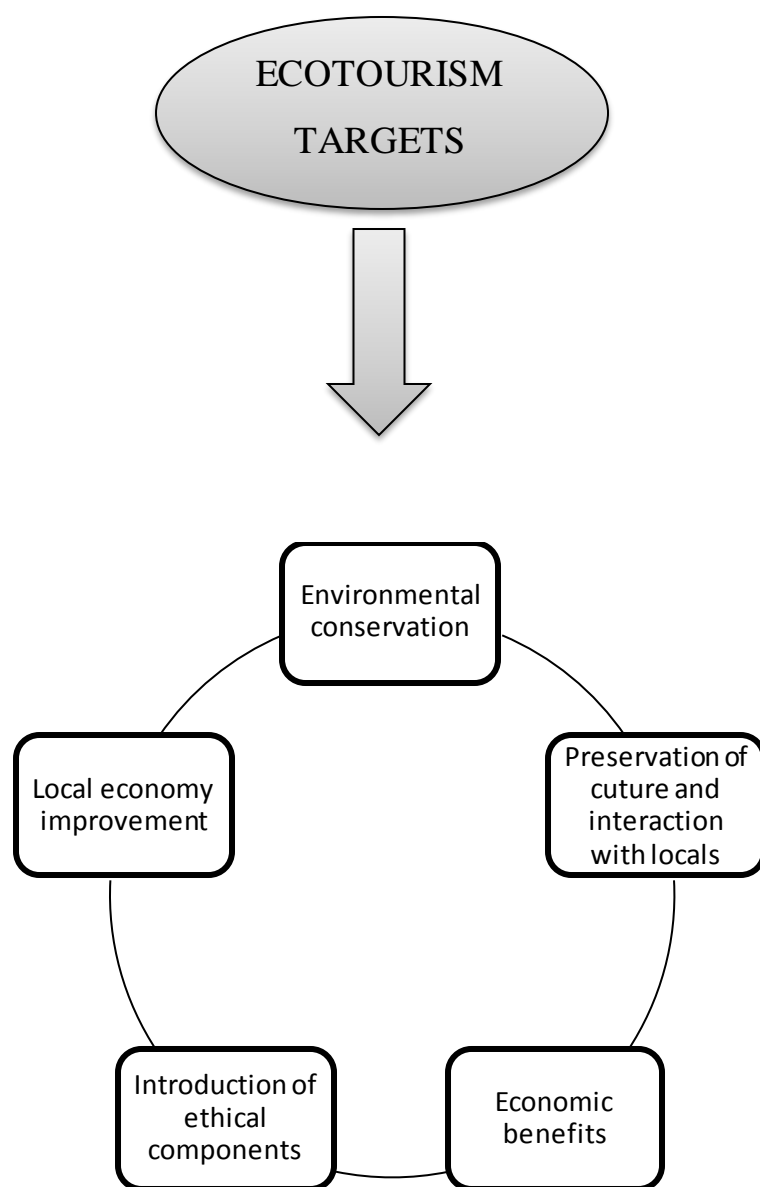
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Annexe 1



Source: Own preparation